

# Coaching for a Healthy Mindset

## A Resource for Fitness Professionals

**F**itness professionals know that a client having a healthy mindset and attitude toward exercise is important in adhering to and maximizing the fitness experience. Dips in motivation, busy schedules and physical injury are realities that often derail exercisers from their routines. Many fitness professionals, however, aren't schooled in mindset development and may not have the tools or background necessary to help a client develop the right one. Here are a few easily implemented yet often-ignored ideas to better coach clients toward a healthy mindset about exercise.

### **1. Know your clients, and adapt.**

Motivation is idiosyncratic, meaning what motivates one person to adopt and adhere to an exercise program may not motivate another. Differences exist in personality and motivation style, and those differences may determine the success of different modes of exercise. For example, individuals who have participated in team sports or group



exercise tend to be more motivated by social connectedness than those who typically choose long distance running, solitary sports or resistance training exercise. Those who choose resistance training and competitive sports are often motivated by a sense of challenge while those who choose moderate aerobic activity are motivated to avoid ill health or manage their weight.

This is all useful information for a fitness professional to obtain. A client motivated by teamwork and challenge desires a different experience than someone motivated strictly by weight loss and better health. Developing a healthy mindset isn't necessarily about changing the client; rather it's changing the environment to match the client's existing mindset. Get to know your client's fitness history, previous fitness environments, as well as a clear understanding of current goals and motivations.

## **2. Match benefits, research to client goals.**

Exercise doesn't only yield physiological benefits. Vast amounts of literature support the association between physical fitness and enhanced brain function, better sleep and less anxiety. When we appreciate the natural human difficulty of making lifestyle changes, we realize that simple motivational comments like, "just think of how much better you'll look by beach season!" are often insufficient in igniting the motivation to get started. Fitness professionals must be equipped with extensive reasoning behind adding fitness into their clients' lives – and these reasons should be aligned with their current goals. For example, if a client reveals the desire to be more involved with her grandchildren, locate and present research about exercise's effects on energy levels within an aging population. A client who wants to strengthen his marriage may find motivation in research



showing a positive correlation between exercise and mood, exercise and sexual endurance or the benefits of exercising with a partner/spouse. Look beyond aesthetic and superficial goals while conducting an intake assessment to find the real “why” for exercise.

### 3. Establish client confidence before they begin.

New research indicates that people benefit more from exercise when they believe it will have a positive effect. People who already believe physical activity will have positive effects – “I know this is going to help me!” – tend to enjoy exercise more, improve mood and reduce anxiety. This idea backs the self-fulfilling prophecy: Expecting something to happen helps cause that thing to happen. In addition, studies reveal a neurophysiological difference between optimistic and pessimistic test subjects. According to the measurements of brain activity, the participants with greater expectations before the beginning of the study were more relaxed on a neuronal level. The message for fitness professionals is that a client’s beliefs about the benefits of exercise should be established before starting a program. Excitingly, evidence shows that people can be positively or negatively influenced in this regard. Those who have received positive messages about exercise by a variety of important people in their lives, or those who have been exposed to films and other media about the health benefits of exercise beforehand, tend to buy in more.

- **Ask questions** to understand what activities your clients have chosen previously and why. If they’ve had success sticking with fitness before, what factors motivated them to keep at it?
- **Ask your client about current goals** and don’t accept generic answers like “I want to get stronger,” “I want to look better,” or “to get healthier.” Don’t be afraid to take out the shovel and dig deeper: WHY are those things

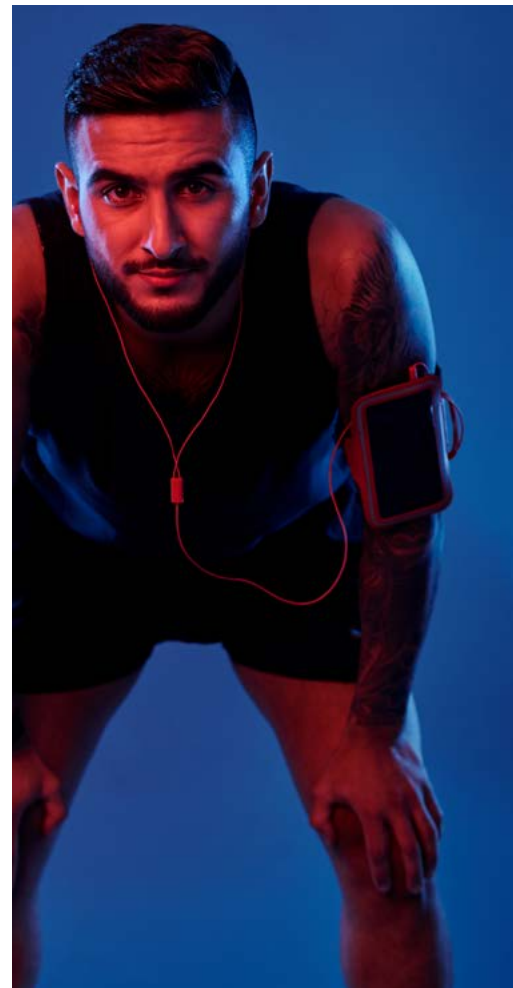


important to you? How will getting stronger / looking better / getting healthier lead to an enhanced, more meaningful life? What will accomplishing those things do for you? Also, don't be afraid to challenge them on answers you suspect may be offered simply because they "sound" right.

- **Consider helping your client set SMART goals** for those who list a specific primary goal, such as "getting stronger."
  - **Specific:** What are the specific movements or exercises in which you want to get stronger?
  - **Measurable:** How can we measure your progress?
  - **Adjustable:** Sometimes your goals may be set too high or too low. Keep in mind that goals can be adjusted along the way.
  - **Realistic:** Goals that are too high or too low make working toward them less enjoyable. Make goals challenging, yet achievable.
  - **Time sensitive:** By what date do you want to accomplish your goal?

## 4. Present evidence.

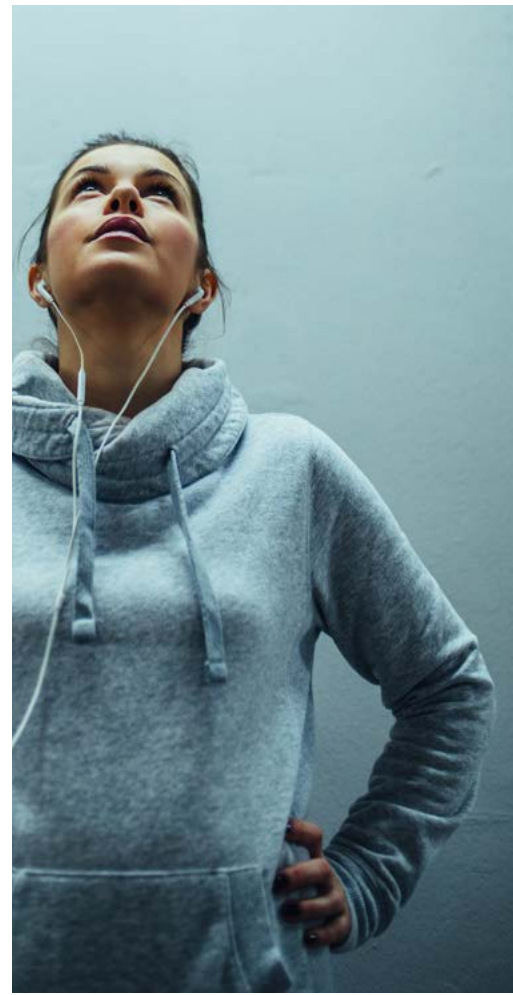
Once you've gotten to know your client's short- and long-term goals, find evidence to show how fitness can support progress toward those goals. You can find many useful client handouts and infographics in the [ACSM.org](https://www.acsm.org) Resource Library.



## 5. Foster intrinsic motivation.

Consider how you can enhance your clients' beliefs in themselves as well as the exercise process. Videos and your own persuasive language can help.

- Encourage conversations that get clients thinking about past accomplishments with physical activity: Have there been times in life when physical activity played a positive role?
- Walk them through a few imagery scenes – have them mentally rehearse the positive changes they're looking to enjoy through exercise. Can you guide them through a process where they can clearly see what better health looks and feels like? For clients who are open to the process, tasking them with nightly imagery sessions before bed, for instance, may be something they embrace and can be beneficial in enhancing their self-confidence.



**AMERICAN COLLEGE**  
**of SPORTS MEDICINE**  
**LEADING THE WAY**

Copyright © 2020 American College of Sports Medicine. This brochure was created by Greg Chertok, M.Ed., CMPC and is a product of ACSM's Consumer Outreach Committee. Visit ACSM online at [www.acsm.org](http://www.acsm.org).